

# Status of Women in India Then and Now

by

Illindila Saraswati Devi

The Telugu original, *Bharata Naari*  
- *Naadu Nedu* (1975)  
translated into English by  
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## From Translator

Reputable writer Illindila Saraswati Devi (1918-1998) traces the history of women's status in our society and their rights from Vedic times to current day. The book has been published in 1975, and so, I would assume that it records the progress up to the third quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Basically, the author shows that the rights, today's women are fighting for, were already put in place several centuries ago. She has quoted numerous precepts from Vedas and other texts written by ancient sages to prove her point.

Today, many writers and scholars frequently quote Manu's statement, *na stri swatantryam arhati* (no woman deserves independence). Nevertheless, they ignore the constructs formulated by other highly revered sages like Yajnavalkya (7<sup>th</sup> Century BC) and Kautilya (4<sup>th</sup> Century BC).

Saraswati Devi draws an interesting comparison between the concept of marriage prevalent in India and that in the Western countries. She claims that, while marriage in India has been based on the principles of Dharma, and extends to the life beyond, the concept of marriage in the West is based on the life on earth. In support of her comment, she quotes Vivekananda's statement that the Westerners view a woman as a woman while Indians worship a woman as a mother.

The author, arguably, suggests that the revision of Hindu Code Law in the 30's and 40's did not do justice to women in regard to women's rights simply because they were not aware of the rights women had enjoyed in the early period. The rights have been demolished during in the middle ages under Muslim rule. After we have achieved independence, the law-makers, mostly western-educated, had no knowledge or understanding of women's status and rights of earlier period, and thus, failed to recognize the rights women had enjoyed.

Saraswati Devi presents powerfully a case for not only the need to change our views in regard to the present status of women in India but also delves deep into the reasons that led to the current state of affairs.

This book is a succinct study of the status of women in India from ancient times to current day. This will serve as a valuable resource for those, who have no time to read a handful books on the subject.

Regarding translation: 1. I downloaded the Telugu original from archive.org. I am grateful to them for making it available. However, the xerox copy is not clear in some places. In such instances, I tried my best to use possible text, and continued my translation work. Any suggestions in this regard are welcome.

2, Regarding copyright, I would like to mention that I have tried the hardest to find the author's heirs to request permission but to no avail.

As I felt that this is an important work that needs further exposure, I took the liberty of translating under the "fair use" provision in the copyright laws. (See Copyright Disclaimer under section 107 of the Copyright Act 1976, allowance is made for "fair use" for purposes such as criticism, comment, news reporting, teaching, scholarship, education and research.)

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## STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIA, THEN AND NOW

Every individual commands respect in the society as long as he/she lives in that society. The respect, however, depends on his/her place in the society and the role he/she plays.

Nature has created man and woman. They have been attracted to each other and become instrumental in the procreation. That is a truth that needs no proof. The two individuals, man and woman, share household responsibilities and continue to live as a couple. However, the questions such as who is superior and who is more important have risen when they were born, and have grown stronger in course of time. The questions remained unanswered to this day.

Bruhadaarakopanishad has created the concept that "man is superior " and further strengthened it. Since he is superior, he has been treated as the primary individual. The Prajapati (the creator) felt his loneliness unbearable, and cut his body into two in order to have a happy life. The other half turned out to be a woman and that gave him immense pleasure. That being the result of a *patanam* (fall), they came to be known as *pati* (husband) and *patni* (wife). In course of time, the word *pati* came to mean husband (the one that bears the burden) and *patni* the wife (the one whose burden the husband bears) and got rooted deep. We can find a similar story in the Bible. The story goes like this: God created man and the man felt an unbearable pain for want of company. Then God created the woman from a bone in his side.

These two stories, one from the Bible and the other from the Bruhadaaraka Upanishad, vary in wording but convey the same message in essence. The question of who is the superior of the two is not peculiar to one society or one country. Every country has grappled with this question. Every country has debated it. At the same time, however, women also have commanded respect to a certain degree in every country. Does she have equal status with man and, if not, should she have equal status? These questions are being debated even now. As a result

of persistent discussions and movements, women in some countries have acquired equal status. In a few other countries, laws have been created but are futile in actuality. The difference is only in degree.

"Women in Western countries have progressed significantly and acquired equal status with men. Women in India are lagging far behind. Their status in society is hopelessly bad." This view is prevalent not only among foreigners but also among some persons in our country as well.

However, there is a huge difference between the status of women in India and the women in other countries. The perception of women in India is very different.

*yatranaaryastu pujiyante*  
*ramante tatra devataah*  
*yatraistu taastu na pujiyante*  
*sarvaastatraah phalaah kriyaah*

(Where women are worshipped, there, Gods are pleased. Where women are not worshipped, there, all deeds are futile.) This is the ideal for Indians. It has been prevalent from prehistoric times.

A French writer, Louis Jacoilliot, stated his view of Indians as, "The civilization of India, which has created the highest status for women at home and in society dates back to prehistoric times. No other religion has given this much respect to women as the Hindu religion in the Vedas. Their civilization and culture are older than the Jewish culture and civilization."

In today's society, the status of men and women are valued based on their financial status, educational qualifications and opportunities in politics. But in ancient times, their status was based on their specific duties in religious activities.

Since woman is created for a different purpose than man, her physical build is also different. For the same reason, women do not possess the ability to do some acts that a man can do by his strength. Her physique stands in her way to do the same. However, just for that reason, to consider a woman as lower in status than a man is wrong and foolish. Religion and society must lend support to the men

and women in performing their duties as assigned to them individually. Woman is an equal partner to a man in conceiving, delivering and raising children, and further by cooperating with the man in accomplishing his *Gruhasta* dharma (one's duties as a family man).

#### DURING VEDIC PERIOD

There is an enormous difference between the institutions of Western countries and India. In those countries, the institution of marriage has been created exclusively based on materialism. In India, the institution of marriage is deep-rooted in Dharma, and Artha and Kama are its branches. According to Vedas, pleasing Gods by performing Yajna and similar Vedic rites, and thereby seeking heaven, are duties of man. A man or a woman does not have the right to perform Yajna rituals by himself or herself. The ancient sages have determined that only couples are qualified to perform them. Since the husband is not eligible to perform the ritual by himself without the wife's participation, the prominence of the wife and the necessity for marriage have acquired a significant place in Hindu religion. The husband and wife should respect each other and make the Gruhasta<sup>i</sup> asrama purposeful. In Hindu religion, the status of marriage has received the highest status for the same reason. The Gruhasta asrama is held highest in a man's life and the man is expected to serve guests, sages, disciples of Vedic studies, the needy and the poor with utmost respect. It is the wife's duty to stand by her husband's side and support in performing the Vedic Rites and help him in completing his duties. The Daksha Smruthi holds the couples who respect each other and perform their duties in high regard. The woman who is harmonious, sympathetic, modest, proficient, reclusive, and loving toward her husband is considered not a human but the goddess in every sense of the word. The creators of Smrutis have ascertained that the man who has gotten such a wife enjoys heaven on earth.

Wife is not husband's slave. The reference in Rigveda, *jayedasta*, meaning man is borne by woman in the form of progeny, asserts the same view. We can

find similar views in Yajurveda also. Because a woman is instrumental in accomplishing the primary goals of Dharma, Artha and Kama, she is held in highest regard. The woman has been given extraordinary respect because she functions in consonance with her husband side by side in rendering his duties in all the three Asramas- Dharma, Artha(Material) and Moksha(Salvation).

*prajamanu prajayase*

*tadute marthyamrutam.*

(Oh Man, you were born in accordance with the principles of procreation. Therefore, procreation is your ambrosia.)

Women have been given unparalleled respect in our society because she offers immense support to her husband and the family in multiple ways. She has been created not only for providing physical pleasures to man but also for his redemption in the form of sons, who, in turn, are the means to obtain salvation. That being the case, the argument that woman has been created only for man's physical pleasure goes against the grain of the fundamental Vedic principles.

At the time of marriage, the groom, while walking the seven steps around the sacred fire, tells the bride, "by walking these seven steps together, we have become friends now. Let's not leave each other ever. Let's be supportive of each other in performing our duties, be devoted to each other, and live in harmony." Since the bond of marriage continues beyond death, marriage is considered unbreakable. The Vedas imply that neither husband nor wife must leave the other. The Vedas praise highly the woman who wins over her husband through love.

There is a huge difference between the affinity the couples will have for each other; and the other kinds of amity as well. However, other kinds of affinity may die in course of time but the affinity between the husband and wife does not die because of the Vedic mantras, recited during their wedding ceremony. The Vedic hymns note that not only the amiability between husband and wife must exist as long as the marital status exists but the marital status also must continue as long as amiability exists. The marital precept is, "Marriage is permanent and so is

amiability. Thus, those, who walk out on a marriage, are essentially considered to have violated the Vedic principles.

Although the husband has command over the wife, he should win her over by being amiable toward her. A woman without love at heart cannot gain the affection of her husband, is it not so?

The couple prays *sammaatariswasam dhata samudeshtri dadhaatanau* (May we two, together, be blessed with congruous intelligence by God of Wind, Brahma and Saraswati.).

In view of the above, the status a man gives to a woman sounds somewhat strange, regardless of his apparent superiority. In the Vedas, man regards woman not only as his equal but also gives himself up to her.

*asmin gruha garhapatyaya jaagruhi.* (Oh Bride! Be awake to rule this home.). The bride is not a slave to man. She is the lady that has been invited to grace the throne. She is the lady who came to command the home with universal maternal love. Her rule does not cause distress for the citizens of her kingdom. Under her rule, all the troubles, which previously existed, would be absolved. It becomes heaven on earth. In those days, the heaven that resulted from man's good deeds had been subject to woman's will. Thus the adage *bhaaryaadheenasthadha swargah* (heaven at wife's will.) has come into vogue.

During that period, women played a prominent role in mundane activities. Bruhaspati wrote Artha Sastra in accordance with the prescripts of humans, Gandharvas and Goddesses, after serving them for some time. During the period of ancient sages, Anasuya and Arundhati were scholars in Artha Sastra; Maitreyi and Gargi were great orators; and, Gargi was an eminent scholar in Vedic texts. Gargi's work, *Brahmanyam*, shows that she has participated in Vedic debates. Similarly, Lopamudra and Viswavaara are memorable for their unparalleled Vedic knowledge. Therefore, we cannot say that there were no poets in the past, although the number was small.

It is well-known that 23 of the 1028 hymns of Rugveda were authored by women. Since some hymns were created by women, and women were allowed to



study some mantras. Therefore, it is not fair to say that women were forbidden to read Vedas always, and on all occasions.

During the Vedic period, also known as the Sruti period, women clearly had the right to participate in religious activities. Women had written Veda Sutras. Men were not allowed to perform Vedic rituals like Yagna, Yaga, Havana and Krathuvu<sup>ii</sup> without women's participation. At some point, salvation by penance became important and women were considered an obstruction to achieve that goal. Later during the Daiva Smruti period, women were declared ineligible to study Vedas.

*Upanayanam*<sup>iii</sup> was a necessary step to study Vedas, performed at the age of seven. It was an important event in the lives of boys and girls. Both Upanayanam and Vedic Studies played a significant role in arranging marriages.

Dharma Sastra treatises, called Smrutis were written by sages in ancient times. During the Smruti period, there was no lack of respect for women. They believed that the lineage would be served better by daughters, who had no brothers, than the daughters, who had brothers. A daughter could continue the lineage in much the same way as a son. For that reason, she was referred to as "putrika", a term specific only to the daughters without brothers. A daughter, who had no brothers, could save her father from the hell called "*puth*", from which the term putrika was coined.

Manu Smruti said *aputro nekavidhina sutaam kurveeta putrikaam* (those who had no sons should accept the daughter as a son). That was one way for men, who had no sons, to continue their lineage. Giving away a daughter in marriage was valued highest of the sixteen benevolent acts as prescribed in Vedas. In ancient works, giving away a daughter in marriage facilitated salvation for not only her father but also for the parents of previous generations.

*dasyaami Vishnave thubhyam*

*Brahmaloka jigeeshaya*

"I am giving away my daughter to you, an embodiment of Vishnu, with the hope of going to the world of Brahma," says the father to the groom at the time of marriage.

*"tvaddaanaath moksham aapnuyaam,"*

"I may obtain redemption through the act of giving you away," says the father to his daughter.

*kanyaam imaam pradasyaami*

*pitruunaam taaranaayavai*

"I am giving away this young woman for the redemption of my forefathers."

In the Samvartha Purana, the result of giving a bride away is described as follows: He, who gives away [in marriage] a beautifully decorated young woman through the process of the Brahmin wedding ceremony, will receive plenty of grace, fame, company of the virtuous, and several material goods. The result will be one hundred times better than the one received by performing Jyotishtoma rite. He who gives away a woman, sanctified by Homa mantra and decorated with valuable jewels, will go to heaven and be worshiped by the gods.

It shows how a girl can be a great savior of her parents and their ancestors. It also illustrates that the authors of Smruthi held women in high regard.

Daughters have helped their families for several generations. Smruti also expresses the opinion that daughter's daughters also contribute to the redemption of their ancestors.

Bodhayana states that a man cannot marry a woman of his own accord. Gods bestow the wife on him. Husband should always respect the woman he has married. That pleases Gods.

And Bodhayana continues to specify the harshest punishment for the man who leaves his wife.

Daksha Smruti stated, "Although during the Smruti period a woman was declared ineligible to study Vedas or to have Upanayanam, she, however, was considered to have performed the rituals that were performed by her husband by virtue of *paanigrahanam*<sup>iv</sup>. She was required, inevitably, to participate in some rituals. During some of the Srauta ceremonies, wife was considered to have attempted *sannahanam*<sup>v</sup>. Without reciting the mantras, she would be considered to have done so by virtue of participating in the ceremony with her husband. But nowhere it was said that she had to share his sins. A wife could go to heaven, regardless of husband's sins.

## WOMAN'S PROPERTY

In Manu Smruti, each brother should give one fourth of his property to his sister. He would go to hell if he failed to do so. Yajnavalkya stated clearly that the brother should spend one fourth of his property on her marriage, in the case the occasion should arise. Manu stated that the woman also was entitled to a portion of her maternal grandmother. Smruti mentions that daughters should share their mother's property after her death. Manu has stated that not only daughters but mothers also will have rights to the property in some situations. Manu added that the property of the childless son belongs to the mother. Yajnavalkya ruled that after the death of a man, the mother(his wife) has a right to his property along with sons. There are also other means by which women may inherit property in addition to the above mentioned conditions.

According to the creators of Smruti, there are six categories by which a woman would be eligible for receiving the wealth:

1. The money given to the bride by her parents with the sacred fire as their witness at the time of marriage.
2. The money given to the daughter at the time she leaves for husband's home.
3. The property given by her husband voluntarily.

4, 5, and 6. The money given to her by brothers, mother and father on various occasions.

Yajnavalkya confirms the same view. He said brothers, mother, father and brothers-in-law must be respectful toward her and give jewelry etc. to her regularly. Ancient sages also stated that the house in which girls are not adored would be accursed by the women, and that house will be annihilated. The wealth given by brothers and others could be in various forms. There is a custom of groom money to the father of the bride and also to the bride. That money belongs to the bride, and must not be used by her parents. Husband must not remarry if the wife is healthy and has given birth to children. In the event the husband needed to remarry, he should give his first wife a sum equivalent to the money he spent on the second marriage. It is the responsibility of the king to protect women's assets. Stealing a woman's money is considered a great sin.

#### INDIAN WOMEN, THEIR HEREDITARY RIGHTS.

It is established that the Dharma Sutras were formed by sage Gautama. Manu Dharma Sutras were written in 2000 B.C. and Yajnavalkya Samhita in 1000 B.C. according to research scholars. There were no standard treatises in regard to traditions and royal inscriptions prior to Manu. There were historical records of kings but no records of duties of people.

According to Manu Dharma Sastra, women had no rights. Women should be protected by father in childhood, by husband in adulthood, and by sons in old age. Manu prescribed *na stri swatantryam arhati*.<sup>vi</sup> Yajnavalkya, however, granted a few rights to women. He specified a few rights for widows both in joint families<sup>vii</sup> and nuclear families. In joint families, he arranged a sum suitable for their status to be given to widows, who had no children. In individual families, a childless widow was entitled to enjoy her husband's wealth only during her lifetime.

In the 11th Century, Vijnaneswarudu wrote an interpretation of Hindu Dharma Sastra. It is called Mitakshari. It was to be adopted by the entire country. This allowed women to have a few rights and powers. Women were allowed to adopt

children. She possessed the right to use husband's property after his death in times of dire necessity and for the welfare of the family. By this rule, she was able to sell some property and spend on her daughters' marriage, and court costs. She was also required to settle husband's loans. She even received the right to manage and improve property values.

In Hindu Dharma, women received property in two ways: Through blood relationship and religious rites such as death ritual. Close relatives would have to perform the death ritual for the dead person. If the dead person had sons, the responsibility falls totally on the shoulders of the sons. If he had no son, the widow would have to take up that responsibility. Thus the Mitakshari of Vijnaneswarudu combined the religious duties, blood relationship and death ritual into one.

#### MARRIAGE.

In regard to marriage also, the ancient sages had made a few rules for the same of society's welfare. According to Dharma Sastra the couples, married according to tradition, must remain bound for the rest of their lives. Kautilya, 4 BC, provided for the couples to break up under certain conditions. This permission was however granted only in the case of marriages performed in accordance with the Gandharva, Asura, Paisachika traditions. And it was limited to non-Brahmin castes. According to Dharma Sastra of Kautilya, the woman, who was left by her husband, was entitled to receive some maintenance allowance known as *manovarti*. The amount depended on the husband's income. He also laid rules for women to remarry under certain circumstances. Kautilya considered a woman's remarriage a *niyogam*<sup>viii</sup>. Women belonging to the castes of Brahmana, Kshatriya, Vaisya, Sudra were permitted to remarry if the husband left for another country or she was childless. And also in the cases such as husband moved to another country, became Sanyasin, or died, and she had no children, she was permitted to remarry after seven months. She could marry her husband's brother or someone from a proper *gotra*<sup>ix</sup>.

Kautilya stated a woman could remarry or remain a widow and lead a chaste life. He set many rigorous rules for men to be able to remarry. The man could remarry only if his wife had no children, or all his children were dead, and only after eight years had passed. If his wife had given birth to a dead child, he would have to wait for ten years. If he had no male child, he would have to marry according to the principles detailed above. He who violates these rules would have to face punishment.

In short, Kautilya's Dharma Sutra are more favorable to women than men.

It is obvious that Dharma Sutras were not set uniformly even in ancient times. The Dharma was defined based on the social conditions at the time and codified. That is why we see variations in different texts by Manu, Parasara and Kautilya.

## EQUAL RIGHTS

Men and women will have equal rights to the money because of marriage. sage Apasthamba considered it a plausible equality if the husband earns money and the wife manages it efficiently. Manu also stated,

*arthasya sangra chaivaam*

*vyaye chaivaam niyojayet*

(Women should be appointed to protect and spend money wisely.) The woman also would have the right to the money after her husband's death, but she would not be obliged for paying off his debts. There were exceptions to this latter rule. She would be responsible to pay off his debts under the following circumstances:

1. The loan he had asked her to pay off at the time of his death;
2. The loan she co-signed along with her husband; and,
3. The loans she had obtained on her own accord.

These three types of loans must be paid by her. In joint families, after a man's death, his brothers should take care of his wife, stated Narada. In short, women appeared to have enjoyed fairly respectable status, regardless of opposition by some persons.

## MOTHER IS A GODDESS

It is obvious women were respected in various measures. Within a family, they were respected in different ways in different roles. The kind of respect varied based on her role as mother, wife, daughter, and widow. Women received the highest form of respect as mothers. Manu said,

*iyam lokam matru bhaktya*

*pitru bhaktya tu madhyamam*

*guru sushrushaa yatyeva*

*Bhrahmalokam samasnute.*

(One may win this world through devotion to mother, ordinary world through devotion to father and the world of Brahma by serving guru.)

Mother, father and guru are the three important worlds, the three Asrama, and the three Agni (sacred fires). Among these three states, mother takes the highest place and thus is held in the highest esteem.

*upadhyayaan dasacharyaa*

*aacharyaanam satam pitaa*

*sahasram tu pitruunmaataa*

*gauravenaati rityachyate*, stated Manu.

(One guru is revered by more than ten teachers, one father is revered by more than one hundred gurus, and one mother is revered thousand times more than one father.)

In Vasishtha Smruti, it is said that

*yathaa mataram aasritya*

*sarve jeevanti jantavah.*

(All animals follow in their mother's footsteps.)

There is one more precept. If the father falls short of being an ideal, the sons need not respect him. On the other hand, mother must be adored even when she had fallen. Sons have no right to judge the mother. Vasishtha argues that the mother is never a fallen woman in the eyes of sons.

Not only mother but mother's mother, wife of guru, sisters of mother and father, mother-in-law, and her sisters should be respected by men. In fact, not only they all, but his mentors also should be held in high esteem. At one point, he says that all women must be revered. Manu and Yajnavalkya also declared that the wishes of a pregnant woman must be fulfilled, and forgive any mistakes she might have committed. Manu also ruled that a man must step aside and give way to women whenever he encounters them.

#### GODDESS ON EARTH

There is a baseless perception that women must not be allowed freedom. It is not clear when and where it was stated. It is possible some rules were incorporated by some unknown authors. No amount of research may yield a convincing argument for this. Even if we accept it as reliable, it is not proper for us to assume that women were not respected. All Smruti texts declared the woman as the most revered, and to be regarded, as a goddess on Earth. During ancient times, freedom was denied to those who failed to wish for the welfare of the others.

During that period, women got together, and held gatherings, exclusively for women, to discuss worldly matters. They also attended gatherings held by men. They served kings. There is also evidence that they fought in wars, and performed rites, usually performed by men.

In Vedas, some hymns, which could be defined only by female philosophers, were authored by women. They have not remained as elitist authors but also, participated in philosophical debates. Women were also earners, and scholars in various other disciplines such as music, dance, and other professions.

In those days, children belonged to the same caste as mothers.

#### GOOD MEN'S CONDUCT

The respect and proper conduct men had shown towards women were clearly evident in the text of Ramayana. That was because of the conduct of the eminently virtuous man, Lord Rama. His brother showed remarkable respect and childlike admiration toward in the same text.



*naaham jaanami keyuure*

*naaham jaanami kankene*

*nuupure tvabhi jaanami*

*nityam paadaabhivandanaath.*

(I do not know her by her ornaments on her arms and wrists, but I do know her by her anklets, which I had noticed as I saluted to her feet every day.). During that period, men treated the mother, guru's wife and older brother's wife, even when she was younger in age, as mothers according to tradition.

When Lord Rama went for a visit, Sage Atri introduced his wife, Anasuya, as

*Anasuyaam, mahabhaagaam*

*taapasiim, dharmacharineem*

and added, "She is the mighty woman who has produced fruits and abundant water from the River Ganges when the sages were starving, due to a huge famine for over ten years. She is the gifted woman that has performed intense penance for ten years. She is a great wife that performs numerous rituals everyday; and, the unparalleled mother that has watched over the sages, and prevented any obstructions they might face. Several years ago, she was able to convert ten nights into one night with her powers in order to accommodate a divine event. You worship that great woman as your mother, and receive her blessings. Let Sita bow to her feet, and seek her blessings."

## MOTHER

It has been established that women have received the highest honor during the Vedic period and at the time of Smriti. From the times immemorial, Indian women have been worshipped as mothers. Swami Vivekananda has reiterated this view in his speeches abroad. He said, "In the West, people treat women as equal. We worship them as mothers."

So far we have revisited women's status during ancient times.

## DURING THE MIDDLE AGES

In course of time, the changes that had occurred in politics affected society. The path laid by ancient scholars was deteriorating gradually. The paths laid by India, which earned its reputation as a global peace-maker, were filled with darkness. The meaning of traditions, in the name of religion, was gone. The traditionalists did not have the patience to explain and prove, with convincing arguments, about our traditions to the youth. It created a huge fissure between traditionalists and modernists. These conditions brought about a huge change in the beliefs of ordinary people.

#### DURING THE MUSLIM PERIOD

Chastity for women was extremely for Hindus. Hindus suffered immense hardships to protect their women. Under these conditions, and changes that were taking place in the society, women lost the advantage of getting married later in life, unlike the women in the past. Fathers, out of necessity, arranged marriages for girls as young as eight or nine, in the name of saving them from degradation. Widowed women were forced to be self-immolated, whether it was because of religion-related commandments, or, because there was no other way to protect them. Sati became a tradition in itself. It would appear that women were never allowed to step out the front door during Muslim rule. Apparently, it was quite a challenge for the Hindu families to live under those circumstances. Nobody could think of women's welfare then.

After the ascent of British Rule, the changes in the country were different. During British rule, the British were engrossed in plundering the country, and transporting valuable items to their country. They implemented the "divide and rule" policy, but were not concerned about religion. Unlike Muslims, the British neither barred Indians from practicing their religion, nor destroyed temples. They, however, worked toward promoting their language by creating plenty of schools and colleges.

Some of the youth, who had received the English education, started examining the country's conditions seriously. People started thinking about introducing reforms in society. Raja Rammohan Roy, Dayananda Saraswati, and

Gopalakrishna Gokhale founded Arya Samaj and Brahma Samaj, and undertook several social reforms.

Although it was an ancient tradition, Raja Rammohan Roy thought the tradition of Sati, by which the widow was forced to self-immolate on her husband's funeral pyre, was horrible, and decided to eradicate it completely. But the traditionalists would not accept such a proposal. Very few accepted it, and support for it also was minimal. Despite the opposition Rammohan Roy faced in his motherland, he was not discouraged. He went to England, discussed it in detail with the British Government, returned to India and convinced the then Governor General of India, Lord William Bentinck, to declare a law making the practice of Sati illegal in 1829. Rammohan Roy became a personification of Brahma in this world for women, who had the fortune of being alive after husband's death.

Women could live longer after their husband's death; but, living as widows was hard. They were not allowed to remarry, due to social constraints imposed on them. Under foreign government, there were no facilities for them to receive education. Other adults at home would not permit it either. How many parents could support widowed daughters? It is normal for the raging hormones to act up in young adults, regardless of gender. After parents' death, the widows without any monetary resources became free laborers under the control of demeaning brothers and brothers-in-law. Life for them was the very personification of silent hardships.

Kandukuri Veeresalingam avowed to change these conditions. He founded homes for widows and created educational opportunities for them. They were taught English and Sanskrit in those schools. He also founded separate schools for them. He wrote textbooks in simple, easily understood language on various subjects for the use of widows. He wrote numerous stories, plays, and novels illustrating the cruel, heart-breaking traditions, and stupid beliefs that were causing enormous harm to the society. He found suitable grooms and arranged marriages for those who wished to remarry. He encouraged young men to marry widows. Veeresalingam rendered invaluable service to widows. He was a great benefactor to countless women, whose lives could have otherwise ended like stumps.

Another champion of women's cause was Gurujada, a great poet and writer, who had written heartrending plays about bride price, dowry, their disastrous effects on families, and the hardships the families were suffering. His musical play puthadi bomma. Purnamma is a timeless classic that speaks of his artistry.

The women were aware of only the environment of their homes but knew nothing of the outside world for several centuries. While staying within the confines of their homes, they, however, have acquired worldly wisdom and imbibed the spirit of the stories of Ramayana, Maha Bharata, Bhagavata and History. Although the women of those times were not literate, they were knowledgeable in all Sastras through oral tradition. Some of them learned Sanskrit and Telugu from gurus and studied the five kavyas. Sitting in the dark corners of their homes, they have written poetry and written kavyas.

Some women wrote romantic kavyas in order to please kings, and promoted the idea that women were basically created to entertain men only. This was a primary factor in our society, which led to the assumption that women were meant to dedicate themselves to the bedroom and kitchen.

In the fourth quarter of the 19th century, some wealthy families, being persuaded by social reformers, sent their daughters to cities for education. They fought against the popular contention, "Why educate women? Are they going to work or undertake any worthwhile job?", and helped their daughters earn degrees. Some of them became doctors. That was considered a progressive step during that period. Among the professional fields, women were able to enter teaching and medical professions without having to fight for it. The wealthy laid the path, and the middle class families followed them. Girls entered schools and colleges in Districts and Taluks. There were no separate schools for girls yet. Coeducation was implemented.

There were, however, questions about this progress. For instance, how many girls went to school? Up to what level? And, what did those, who had received education, do with their education?

Also, not everybody wanted education for their girls; and, many did not want higher education for their daughters. Many of them thought it was enough if a girl learned the alphabet, and was able to check the laundry list. Some families however, decided to continue their daughters' education until marriages for them were arranged. On the boys' side, young men were in school or completed Western education, and so, expected the brides to have some education as well. That resulted in women discontinuing their education after marriage.

Ancient customs and practices were losing their hold gradually. But nobody had a definite, clear-cut, idea regarding what should be the goal and what should be the ideal. Nevertheless, the one custom, that of marrying girls before puberty, continued to prevail. Traditionalists continued to have their daughters married at the age of 8 (the practice, probably, came into vogue during Muslim rule). Usually the groom would be 16, and either attending college or about to enter college. As a part of arranging a marriage, the groom would be introduced to the girl for the sake of appearances; but the decisions would be made by adults. One of the possible consequences was the groom would change his mind after he finished schooling, becomes more sophisticated, and find her not up to his expectations; and, leave her. Other reasons could be she was not civilized enough, not beautiful enough, and/or, simply he did not like. Thus the number of rejected wives increased considerably. Some parents married little girls to older and/or disabled men out of greed. In those circumstances, some girls rebelled while a few took to undesirable ways.

Harabilara Sarda took notice of the despicable consequences of these girls' marriages before puberty, and worked towards enacting a law against child marriages. The Sarda Act was enacted in 1929. By then, Sati practice, polygamy, and child marriages had ended.

We could see a bit of an improvement in the women's conditions.

## INDEPENDENCE MOVEMENT

About this time, Gandhi started assembling an army to organize the National Movement. He looked all over the country for resources. One half of the population was women, who never stepped outside the front door. They were confined to their homes by meaningless customs and senseless beliefs. Gandhi needed their strength, and the gold they had in their possession. With that in mind, Gandhi made use of the strength of their language skills to persuade and attract others to his movement. He invited brave women to participate actively in it. He sent diligent women door to door, asking them to reject foreign goods and embrace native products. He engaged a few others to persuade other women to burn foreign clothes and picket against liquor stores. The Gandhian movement helped the status of women to move one step up. Gandhi praised them for their work. Our society has learned that, "Women can accomplish anything with their bravado and determination; can confront any and every kind of situation. They are capable of any sacrifice. We have read that women took part in wars in the past. Now, we are watching them in action." It was an eye-opener. That our women had sustained beating and imprisonment is a case in point.

In Kolkata, the Hindu Muslim riots flared up and resulted in dreadful acts. Gandhi sent Sarojini Naidu, an eloquent speaker with an angelic voice, to act as an intermediary to appease the two parties. Both the parties, Hindus and Muslims, calmed down because of her captivating voice. This is one more example of women's strength.

Mahatma Gandhi watched his mother and wife closely, and learned that our customs and traditions were ingrained in our women. He believed that women must be engaged in order for society to progress forward. Therefore, he employed women to eradicate the untouchability prevalent in our society. He showed the path for women to work toward regaining women's identity, which was ignored by women in general, and in the society. Mahatma Gandhi awakened them; he said, "Up until now, the society believed that women should silently bear with men's evil ways, and be devoted to their husbands, a tradition known as *pativratyam*<sup>x</sup>. Actually, wife is the right person to show him the right path, when he takes to evil

ways, no matter however much she loves him and respects him. That is her duty. Doing so does not taint her pativratyam."

"The dowry system is ruining families," he said, and that the change should come from women first. "Women need not feel desperate, and get married by paying huge amounts of money, especially when it is not a suitable match. Goddess Parvati is the role model for girls. She performed severe penance, and obtained Lord Siva as husband; she did not buy him with money. Young women could remain unmarried, take to austerity, and dedicate themselves to the service of the country."

Women's conditions improved considerably during Gandhi's lifetime. Separate schools and colleges for women were founded. Women imbibed newly found vitality and social conscientiousness. While their husbands were political prisoners, they managed the household with children and older adults skillfully. They spun thread on spinning wheel, and had clothes made. That was their primary vocation for a while.

#### IN INDEPENDENT INDIA

As a result of Gandhian movement, women obtained voting rights after India achieved Independence. At that time, women in no other country had voting rights. Some women won in elections and became Members of the Legislative Assembly. Srimati Ammanna Raja was elected as Deputy Speaker. Eventually, women became ministers, prime ministers, planning commission members, governors, ambassadors, and president of the U.N. General Assembly.

In independent India, according to the laws of the nation, men and women have equal opportunities without discrimination of caste, religion, color, or sub-sects. They are given education and job opportunities also.

Unmarried women passed the tests such as I.A.S and I.P.S. Later, married women also were allowed to take those tests.

#### CHANGES TOOK PLACE IN WOMEN'S RIGHTS TO INHERITANCE.

Dharma Sastra rules were framed with the progress of society in mind. The progress of any society depends on the boundaries by the society, set at a given

time. If the rules were not changed according to changing times and conditions, it would lead to unruliness and rebellion. The customs and traditions of ancient times are bound to change in step with the changing times. The law that had been put in place previously must, of necessity, be changed according to current practices and customs for the sake of the welfare of society. Changes must be accepted even when those are against the Vedic prescripts. Accordingly, some social reformers undertook to make changes in the laws in 1937.

Until then, widows had the right to husband's property only in nuclear families. After the changes in the law were made, widows earned the right to the husband's property in both nuclear families, and divided families alike. Father had to pass his son's property to the widowed daughter-in-law and grandson's property to his widowed wife. This was, however, limited to enjoying the property during their lifetimes only.

Regardless of numerous changes in the law, a daughter had no right to father's property. It was the responsibility of the father or brothers to make sure that the girl was well-taken care of, and her marriage was arranged in due course. If the father died, the remaining property would be divided among the brothers after proper arrangements were made for the daughter's marriage. After the marriage, the daughter would continue to enjoy these rights in the in-laws home. With the seven steps she had taken around the sacred fire along with her husband at the time of marriage, she would become the responsibility of her husband. From that moment on, there would be changes in her rights, and status.

In ancient times, the property rights extended to three generations only. Death rituals were performed up to three generations only. Accordingly, the heirs were sons, son's sons and his great-grandsons. If there were no sons, the daughter, daughter's daughter, and great-grand-daughter would inherit the property. If there were no heirs, the dead person's property would go to his mother. After her, his father, and then, his brothers would inherit the property, in that order.

Our Dharma Sastra acknowledged eight types of marriages. There is no one Sastra or Sutra that is applicable to all types of marriages. When a man from



higher caste marries a woman from lower caste, it is called anuloma (descending order) marriage. The Hindu Law does not acknowledge it as legal. The marriage would be recognized only after the couple get married under Special Marriage Act.

The Hindu Law did not provide property rights to women. She could enjoy the property after her husband's death, but would not have the right to donate it, or sell it. No matter how rich her father is, she will have no right, not even an iota, to the property. In modern times, the women's situation is devastating due to lack of rights and economic freedom. It fell, exclusively, to women's lot to face all hardships and losses that may arise in marriages. Women's lives depended on the kindness of others, both in the maternal home and in-law's home.

Under these circumstances, the Government of India appointed a Committee to examine the widows' rights as prescribed in Mitakshari, 1937, Hindu Women's Property rights, and daughter's rights in father's property. In June 1941, the Committee reviewed the said laws, and reported that making minor changes in Hindu Law was not sufficient, and suggested that the entire Hindu Law should be examined in its entirety, and codified.

Accordingly, the government appointed another committee. In February 1947, this Committee traveled around the country, and noted the flaws in the original bill. The Committee submitted a report of their findings, and a draft bill suggesting the changes that needed to be made in the Hindu Law to Parliament in August 1948.

The second chapter of Hindu Code Bill contains its suggested reforms regarding marriage. The details included the marriage practices, registration, oaths, witness accounts, and certification. In the third chapter, divorce, reasons for it, ways of proving them, remarriage, and determining children's status were included. In the fourth chapter, adoption, legally acceptable adoption, qualifications for it, right to deny adoption, and other angles, were addressed. Sixth chapter described the property rights in nuclear families and debts. Details regarding women's property was addressed in the seventh chapter; inheritance of women's property in the eighth and ninth were given. The tenth chapter addressed the inheritance of women's property.

After lengthy discussion regarding Hindu Code, the Select Committee submitted its report. This report provided some important changes in the Hindu Code in step with their progressive views.

According to the new Hindu Code, sons would not have the right to inherit property based on birth. Only the owner of the property would have full rights to his property during his lifetime, and nobody else. Property, both real and personal, either inherited, earned by himself, or with other family members jointly, will be distributed according to his Legal Will. Women would have full rights on the property, they have received. Inheritance rights in the case of men's property were designed differently from those of women's property. It was determined that women should receive one half of the property men had received. Both Members of Parliament and Members of Legislative Assembly denied daughters equal rights along with sons.

One truth came to light during the discussions for finalizing the bill. The lawyers, who drafted this bill, were not sufficiently knowledgeable in Sanskrit to interpret the ancient Dharma Sastra texts. The Sanskrit scholars, who were involved in this process, did not have the necessary English language skills to explain the Hindu Dharma texts in English to the lawyers. The net result is, it led to the inequality between men and women in our society.

Well-known Vedic scholar Shakuntala Rao Sastri, ascertained in her book, Women In Dharma Laws,[ Shakuntala Rao Sastri. Women in Hindu Laws. Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. 1953.] as follows, "Working towards restoring the rights, which women had enjoyed in ancient India, back to women is a sign of progress. It would have served the purpose well for the public if the original Hindu Dharma Sastra was properly understood and adopted. During the time that Dharma Sastra was configured, no other country in the world had assigned that level of status to women."

By the beginning of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, a little more progress had been made. The number of separate schools and colleges for women increased considerably. Women entered the field of literature and were

recognized as writers and poets. Prior to the nineteenth century, some women had received kanakabhishekam (a custom of honoring poets and writers by showering them with gold coins.). Currently, women writers have received Sahitya Akademi awards, won first or second prizes in competitions held by magazines. Some women have been writing novels and stories for movies; A few are honored with swarna kankanam [Golden bracelet]. Several women have entered Medical, Educational and other fields, and become invaluable assets to our society. They are shining in politics as well. Some seats are reserved for women in various positions in government.

Ayyadevara Kaleswara Rao created a bill prohibiting dowry, an ill-conceived tradition, that has been ruining families economically. According to the bill, expenses for a marriage must not exceed Rs. 2000.00. If it exceeds the limit, both the giver and the taker will face punishment.

When we review this, one feels like asking, "What else they would need? What else would they want?"

Does our society uphold the ancient tenet, *yatra naaryastu poojyante ramante tatra devataah* (Where women are worshipped, there Gods revel.)? Has the world of women progressed to that point? We cannot help but wonder if our country is one step ahead of other countries, when we look at the number of women, who have acquired college, post-graduate and doctoral degrees, and are working in high ranking jobs.

However, everybody knows that progress in the cities appears to be only a daze, and is good only for boasting. This is only one fourth or one fifth of one percent. It is only good for a show off, but for most of the time, it is a star in the sky, unreachable by ordinary people.

In our society even today, people gasp, "Oh, No," the moment they hear the word 'girl'. Parents are having hard time to find suitable grooms for their girls; the girls mostly are engaged in doing chores at home, and going to school until they get married. Grooms are available only in the black market. Either overtly or covertly, the dowry problem is hurting parents and humiliating girls. Even for the

girls, who are educated and holding jobs with the hope of living on their own, the situation is less than satisfactory. There is no value for their education or earning power. Some parents are postponing their weddings because of their (parents') dependence on daughters' incomes. Today, even for the women who have jobs, it is hard to get married. Parents are not thinking about the girls' happiness. Working wife is rarely respected by her husband. It is also rare for a woman in a lower cadre position to get the same satisfaction as a man in a higher position. Even now, it is difficult for a woman to work without fear amid several male co-workers. She earns yet cannot enjoy economic freedom.

On one hand, the movie producers are making hundreds of thousands rupees by displaying women's physical attributes. On the other hand, women in the lower class are getting crushed by various problems in one form or another. No matter however morally they lead their lives, there is no safety in their married life. They have no right to live a moralistic life, and no pleasure in living with inebriated husbands. There are laws for working women to receive equal pay but not full pay during maternity leave.

Numerous problems are haunting women in our society. Can education, money, jobs, or wisdom protect them from the discrimination prevalent in our society? How far the woman's status in the country has improved because of laws, moralistic words or lectures?

For all these conditions, there is only one important reason. We have to ask -

What do you mean when you say "woman"?

How does society perceive women?

In its mind, "Woman is a weakling, frail, an object of pleasure for men; she belongs to a separate race, caste, class, or religion."

That is the reason women are unable to win society's empathy in regard to her welfare, pleasures and pain, and a better life for themselves. It craves to enjoy her because she is weak, believes she should be treated only as an object of pleasure, humiliates her, ridicules her. If it gets a chance, it causes her to fall, and even makes money by throwing her as an enticement.

Why?

Because society views her as somebody else.

Is the relationship between man and woman like the relationship between the mill-owner and a worker?

Or, like the relationship between the ruler and the ruled?

Is that because of the difference between the weak and the powerful?

Or, something like the difference between the learned and the ignorant?

It is totally confusing.

Some claim that there is no redemption for women until patriarchy is gone and matriarchy prevails. Others argue that men and women, together, make up society, share responsibility for managing the house equally, and that their collaborative effort is the foundation of the home and society. The respect a woman receives extends to the man as well, and also her status, clout, progress, knowledge and acumen. If she is humiliated, it goes to the man and extends to society. Her insults are insults to the man.

The word 'woman' stands for mother, wife, and daughter.

If one does not think along those lines, one cannot understand who a woman is.

Since some women have started thinking along those lines, change has started taking place. So also revenge and angst. Things like defiance of men, accusations, insulting articles, and words have started flying around. Men and women should be living affably, like in the expression, "ksheera neera nyayam" (like milk and water.). Instead, their modes of thinking are moving in opposite directions. Polite language has given place to rudeness. Some women go even further, and ask why women cannot make the same mistakes men make? Why they could not be forgiven in the same manner as men for the same mistakes? Instead of suggesting ways to change men's attitude, some women are fighting for rights to make the mistakes men make.

This attitude has resulted in mutual insults and ridicule. Before the laws and rights are established fully, there used to be the tradition of "respecting women

and worshipping women". Even when there was no right to inheritance, there was the tradition of sending women to their in-law's home with several gifts such as cash, gold, things of value, fruits, and new garments. There was a tradition of respecting her even when she was an enemy's wife. Even the enmity at its worst was never shown on women but remained between the men. Women have been treated as mothers, wives, and daughters always.

Now, it has turned upside down. There is no procreation without woman. It is the mother who carries the child for nine months, feeds, and raises it. Woman is the foundation for man's pleasures in this world as well the next. Woman is one half of man. It is not possible for each to achieve complete progress without the other. Even if it is accomplished, it will not give the same pleasure as the pleasure of being together. Therefore, it has to be done collectively.

The mode of thinking in our society must change. Women are the backbone of our society and life-support. In our society, civility and the view that we should get respect by respecting women must develop naturally. There is no use of passing laws and regulations, without people imbibing good manners. Scholars, writers, social reformers and politicians need to realize this truth.

Nowadays we are hearing serious discussions about harmoniousness of ideas and patriotism. We are talking about them, and encouraging them. The elite assert unanimously that people will be happy and prosperous with that kind of harmony. They hope for it.

But, from where should this ideology of harmoniousness arise? Experienced individuals claim that our culture was born and conserved in the homes of ancient sages. But then, where is its root? Where is the root collar for this plant?

**MUTUAL RESPECT IS NEEDED.**

For harmonious thinking, people should understand each other, be empathetic to each other's happiness and distress, and be there for each other in times of need. Each should wish the best for the other. This empathy must start with couples. Then, it should extend to society, and finally, permeate through out the country, like the scent from Jasmine flowers. If a man cannot empathize with his

mother, wife and daughter, he cannot do so in other places either. Society cannot fare well without the education, and degrees that teach courtesy and generosity. In a society that is not doing well, men and women may fare well, but begetting healthy children would be hard.

The person, who thinks everything is fine when he is fine, needs to change his attitude and invite women into his world. Then only we will have real progress. If one person fares well, that is not progress. Similarly, when women rebel, fight for their progress through laws, and installing matriarchy, that too would be incomplete. The real progress is when both men and women work side by side with congeniality. That is well-rounded progress. And it lays ground for the progress of future generations.

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(The Telugu original, *Bharata naari - naaduu neduu*, was written by Illindila Saraswati Devi, and published by Yuva Bharati, Secunderabad, 1975.

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<sup>i</sup> Second of 4 Asramas, viz. Brahmacharya, Gruhastha, Vanaprastha, and Sanyasa

<sup>ii</sup> Various types of Vedic rituals.

<sup>iii</sup> Initiation rite to study Vedas.

<sup>iv</sup> Bride receiving/holding hand of the groom at the time of wedding.

<sup>v</sup> Lit. Attempt, breast armor.

<sup>vi</sup> No woman deserves freedom.

<sup>vii</sup> Extended family.

<sup>viii</sup> Mandate.

<sup>ix</sup> Lineage from ancient times.

<sup>x</sup> Wife's unflinching devotion to husband.